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ABSTRACT

Hispanic students have higher dropout rates and lower academic achievement than Anglo students. While schools have begun to address the issue of underachievement, some community groups have implemented enrichment programs that focus on the affective domain--self-esteem, family values, and cultural pride. This digest describes and synthesizes the successful strategies of several community programs in Texas and southern California: Valued Youth Partnership Program (San Antonio), Youth Community Service program (Los Angeles), Project ONDA (Opportunities for Networking and Developing Aspirations) (Dallas), Pasadera (Stepping Stone) Program (San Antonio), National Hispanic Institute programs (Austin), Del Mar College's Prefreshman Engineering Program (Corpus Christi), the University of Texas at El Paso's Mother-Daughter Program, and ADVANCE (San Antonio). These programs involve peer tutoring, adult mentors, training in leadership and communication skills, support groups, health promotion, child abuse prevention, and college experiences for high school students. These programs share many key features. In particular, they: (1) actively recruit students; (2) serve a small group of students; (3) direct personal attention at students; (4) focus on enrichment, not deficits; (5) target the affective domain; (6) validate the language and culture of students' homes; (7) provide support and role models using local resources; (8) facilitate other support needed to ensure attendance; and (9) celebrate students' accomplishments publicly. This digest contains 10 references. (SV)

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ERIC DIGEST

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Making Education Work for Mexican-Americans: Promising Community Practices

Digest EDO-RC-90-2

THE 1980S WERE HERALDED as the decade of the Hispanic. Studies documented the underachievement and dropout rates of Hispanic students in our nation's public schools. Many reports decried what they perceived as the low expectations set for culturally and linguistically different students (Hispanic Policy Development Project, 1988).

While schools began to address the issue of underachievement, community groups began to implement enrichment programs that focused more on the affective domain. They established programs centered on family values and cultural pride. This Digest describes such programs and synthesizes their successful strategies.

Why the Interest in Hispanics?

Hispanic students have not been served particularly well by the educational system (Hispanic Policy Development Project, 1988; Quality Education for Minorities Project, 1990). Many students read two or more grade levels below grade placement, and comparatively few score at advanced levels on standardized tests. The National Assessment of Educational Progress reported that only 27 percent of Hispanic eleventh-grade students proficient in English scored at or above the "adept" reading level, whereas only 14 percent of those from language minority backgrounds did so. Nearly half of all Anglo students scored at this level (Duran, 1988).

The dropout rate for Hispanic students is high, 33 to 50 percent. In Texas, Hispanic youth are twice as likely as their Anglo counterparts to drop out; half of Hispanic dropouts do not finish the ninth grade (Cardenas, Robledo, & Supik, 1986).

Recent reports (for example, Horn, 1987; Valdivieso & Davis, 1988) present other alarming data. The families of about 60 percent of high school dropouts have incomes below $15,000. Moreover, 40 percent of Hispanic children—and 72 percent of Hispanic single females raising children—live in poverty. Finally, the poverty rate for Hispanics has risen in each of the last three years.

The average age of the Hispanic population is 22, and demographers predict that this population will double by the year 2020. Mexican Americans represent 63 percent of all Hispanics (Valdivieso & Davis, 1988).

Which students are served?

Community groups have established programs to reduce the high dropout rate among Hispanic students. They target "at-risk" students, that is, those with reading achievement two or more grade levels below grade placement, repeated retention in grade, or high rates of absenteeism and disciplinary referral.

Community groups also help cultivate the aspirations of talented Hispanic students. Though talented, such students may not be getting the advanced instruction they need to succeed academically. Such programs fill in students' background knowledge and refine students' communication skills (for example, in writing, speaking, and conducting interpersonal relationships).

Finally, community programs that focus on prevention help Hispanic children at the preschool level. Programs seek to enrich young students' experiences in the cognitive, affective, and motor domains. Sometimes, the primary emphasis is on training parents.

What do community programs do?

Marshalling resources from parents, school personnel, and business leaders, community-based programs address the precursors of students' achievement by increasing their internalized sense of competence and by enhancing their self-esteem. They help students feel valued and supported.

The Valued Youth Partnership Program of the Intercultural Development Research Association serves 100 youths in San Antonio (Sosa, 1986). This program identifies at-risk students as "valued youth" and trains them to tutor youngsters at nearby elementary schools. The valued youth learn how to be effective tutors and learn how to design instructional materials. Training sessions focus on communication skills, child development theory, and effective teaching.

As these students work with their tutees, they begin to see the rewards of their efforts. They begin to feel the appreciation of both their charges and their teachers. Moreover, as they teach, students reinforce their own basic skills and read stories at their level of independent reading. Field trips to sites of cultural and economic importance provide further enrichment to both sets of students—the tutors and the tutees. As tutors interact with Hispanic role models, they explore the benefits of an education and develop a sense of career prospects.

The Youth Community Service (YCS) program in Los Angeles helps high school students learn about their community and its people (Constitutional Rights Foundation, 1988). This program serves 22 high schools in Los Angeles. Approximately 800 YCS participants take a leadership role in identifying needs and planning activities. To deliver the needed services, the YCS students involve an additional 20,000 youth.

Adults from the community are important adjuncts to the YCS program. Adult mentors help students find meaningful and productive ways to help others. Added support comes from program staff who develop curricula that guide students' work. A leadership retreat and several daylong conferences provide further opportunities for developing new skills, for cultivating reflection, and for expanding networks. A year-end celebration summarizes students' accomplishments and recognizes the results of their efforts.

In Dallas, the League of United Latin Americans developed

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Project ONDA (Opportunities for Networking and Developing Aspirations). Thirty at-risk high school students attend ten Saturday sessions. The objectives include increasing students' self-esteem (by providing Hispanic role models) and enhancing the holding power of the schools (by establishing support groups). Peers, adults, and parents counsel students about goal-setting, being responsible, and prioritizing demands. School buses transport students to a community office. Community groups sponsor breakfast and lunch.

The Pasadera (or Stepping Stone) Program targets high-risk female students in the middle schools of San Antonio. The objective is to increase students' likelihood of being emotionally and economically self-sufficient. The curriculum includes training in assertiveness, physical wellness, and substance abuse issues, and it deals with teen pregnancy (including prevention).

A similar theme, that of developing students' self-confidence and interpersonal skills, can be seen in programs for Mexican-American students who might be bound for college. Although these students can make passing grades, they tend to underestimate their personal and academic potential. The National Hispanic Institute was started in Austin to help Hispanic youth succeed in their careers and personal lives and to become leaders (Obregon, 1987).

The institute operates five programs to help young people become aware of their talents and to develop their interpersonal skills. Each summer, high school students attend a week-long Lorenzo de Zavala Youth Legislative Session at the state capitol. They explore what it means to be Hispanic, and they learn what knowledge and skills they will need to develop to serve as leaders in the future.

Del Mar College (in Corpus Christi, Texas) encourages middle and high school students to consider careers in mathematics, engineering, or science. Its Prefreshman Engineering Program (PREP) serves 110 students. Students attend a two-month series of lectures, seminars, work sessions, and field trips related to the sciences. Field trips and role models expose students to such disciplines as traffic and civil engineering, electrical and chemical engineering, computer science, problem-solving, and plant pathology. During the field trips students get a firsthand look at professional life, and they also talk to experts in their own communities. A dozen companies in the Corpus Christi area serve as cosponsors of the program.

At the University of Texas at El Paso, the Mother-Daughter Program holds meetings once a month with Hispanic female students. The young women have passing grades but are not considered to be "achievers." They visit the college campus four times: for a campus open house, career day, leadership conference, and an awards banquet. The YWCA coordinates transportation to school and community activities. Field trips have included a visit to the courthouse, where a Hispanic woman presides, a visit to view works of art by Latin American artists, and a trip to a medical school. Mothers receive training on building self-esteem, encouraging success, and finding resources to support their daughters' education. Sessions are conducted bilingually.

ADVANCE is another program working with parents to improve their children's education. ADVANCE seeks to prevent child abuse and neglect through the parenting classes it offers to low-income Hispanic women in San Antonio. The curriculum addresses parent communication, discipline, and infant and toddler stimulation and nutrition.

What features do these programs share?

The programs offered by community groups share a number of key features. In particular, they:

- actively recruit students;
- serve a small group of students (25-100);
- direct personal attention at students;
- focus on enrichment, not deficits;
- target the affective domain (for example, self-esteem, interpersonal communication, and aspirations);
- validate the language and culture of students' homes;
- provide support and role models using local resources;
- facilitate other support needed to ensure attendance (for example, providing meals, transportation, and child care); and
- celebrate students' accomplishments publicly.

These characteristics represent three elements essential for the success of community-based programs (Cardenas, 1987): (1) Valuing students, (2) providing Support, and (3) forming Partnerships (VSP).

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